

impression of a “universal women’s religious experience.” Levering’s decision to frame this book as a doctrinally focused introduction to Catholic theology constructed from a stunningly broad sampling of topics and sources makes it difficult, if not impossible, to communicate a detailed presentation of the diversity within Catholic thought on any given issue.

Because of these limitations, this book is not well suited for either the classroom – where contextuality and historicity are key to deconstructing the assumptions of (especially first-year) undergraduate students who think that to be a good theological student consists in the task of correctly memorizing “*the* Christian position” on a subject — or for individual academic research — where depth is key to engagement with the material. Instead, students and scholars would be better served by turning to the writings of these women themselves, many of which are widely available in English translation.

*University of Notre Dame, Indiana, USA*

JULIA FEDER

**Pray the Gay Away: The Extraordinary Lives of Bible Belt Gays.** By BERNADETTE BARTON. Pp. 284. New York and London: New York University Press. 2013. £18.99 (hbk). ISBN: 978-0-8147-8637-6.

*Pray the Gay Away: The Extraordinary Lives of Bible Belt Gays* catalogs the “widespread, institutionally sanctioned practices of exclusion, rejection, and abuse” that have shaped the lives of lesbians, gays, and bisexuals in the predominantly conservative-Christian American South (8). Bernadette Barton is Professor of Sociology and Women’s Studies at Morehead State University. Her previous book, *Stripped: Inside the Lives of Exotic Dancers* (2006), drew on five years of interviews and fieldwork to explore the motivations and challenges of contemporary legal sex workers. As its provocative title suggests, Barton’s most recent work posits an adversarial relationship between sexuality and religion in the “extraordinary lives of Bible Belt Gays” — particularly those who grew up in the West South Central (Texas, Oklahoma, Arkansas, and Louisiana), East South Central (Kentucky, Tennessee, Mississippi, and Alabama), and South Atlantic (West Virginia, Virginia, Maryland, Delaware, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida) census regions of the United States (9).

Barton intends for *Pray the Gay Away* to serve as “a social justice project that uses the individual experience [of queer people in the American South] to unpack the mechanics of domination” (226). In this, she is arguably successful. The author’s autoethnographic account of being a self-described “Bible Belt gay” (Barton relocated to Kentucky for a tenured position at Morehead) and the moving stories of her interlocutors compellingly demonstrate the persistence of homophobic beliefs and actions in the contemporary American South. She further shows that the “Bible Belt Christian attitudes [which] create and maintain a homophobic status quo” in the American South damage not only queer Southerners, but also their families and communities (4, 8).

Barton’s chapters detail experiences of family rejection, loss of religious community or identity, isolation and self-abnegation, ex-gay reparative therapies, the author’s visit to Petersburg, Kentucky’s Creation Museum (“to better understand the religious climate of the Bible Belt,” 152), articulations of and responses to homophobic rhetoric, and new understandings of community and faith as a result of growing up queer in the South. Barton is adamant that her interlocutors are “more than victims” of the “widespread, institutionally sanctioned practices of exclusion, rejection, and abuse” that have shaped their lives and their attitudes toward religion and faith (20, 8). For these reasons, and given Barton’s engaging writing style, *Pray the Gay Away* might be of interest to instructors of undergraduate courses on gay and lesbian studies. Readers invested in queer theory, religious studies, or the study of the American South might take issue with Barton’s work.

The author’s central theoretical apparatus is the concept of the “toxic closet,” which Barton defines as “a condition of inarticulation about the gay self,” the toxicity of which she

attributes to an encouragement of secrecy and shame, as well as an inhibition of communication that compromises social interaction. “We learn in the toxic closet to hold back, to not express ourselves, to accept that we do not deserve the taken-for-granted social courtesies, legal rights, respect, care, and support that heterosexuals enjoy without thought,” Barton explains (88). Barton argues that the “compulsive Christianity” of the American South — theoretically instantiated as a “Bible Belt panopticon” — requires queer Southerners to remain stifled outsiders in their homes, communities, and most especially in their churches (29).

While I do not dispute the toxicity of the closet or the role of shame in the making of the queer self (cf. Sedgwick, Eribon, etc.), Barton’s characterization of compulsory heterosexuality and Christian hegemony in the American South as “especially concentrated” is unconvincing (226). As several American religious studies scholars have noted, American nationalism compels specific kinds of Christian performance for full inclusion in public life and equality before the law, regardless of citizens’ sexualities (cf. Fessenden, Sullivan, Jakobsen and Pellegrini).

There is nothing surprising in finding Southern intolerance of queer people and practices. Indeed, of the eighteen organizations categorized by the Southern Poverty Law Center as “hate groups” that specifically target LGBTIQ persons, five are headquartered in the “Bible Belt.” At the same time, three are headquartered in California and Illinois each, and two in Massachusetts. This is not to suggest that the American South is in any way exempt from sexual intolerance, nor to dismiss the experiences of Barton’s interlocutors. On the contrary, as Michael Cobb suggests in his 2006 *God Hates Fags: The Rhetorics of Religious Violence*, “it is important to realize that this expression of God’s hate, this expression of rancor toward those participating in unlawful sexual practices, comes not only from the fringe . . . [T]his hatred is mainstream” (3). The Southern Poverty Law Center likewise notes that as of 2010, “LGBT people are far more likely than any other minority group in the United States to be victimized by violent hate crime.”<sup>1</sup> All of which is to say that a theorization of American homophobia as in any way limited to the “Bible Belt” falls short, and a consideration of *America* that fails to account for homophobia-as-American is itself incomplete.

So, too, is Barton’s portrayal of Southern Christianity. There is significant terminological slippage among Christian fundamentalism, conservative evangelicalism, independent Christianity, and (most puzzlingly) Roman Catholicism throughout *Pray the Gay Away*. Barton does attempt to complicate terms like “fundamentalist,” “evangelical,” “Religious Right,” and “Christian Right” while noting that terms are “sometimes used in confusing, poorly defined, and overlapping ways” (10). Nevertheless, the author’s cursory treatment of Southern Christian fundamentalism fails to meaningfully define or distinguish among multiple instantiations of Southern Christianities — including but not limited to conservative evangelicalisms and charismatic Christianities — all of which Barton elides into a monolithic force of “militant” Christian fundamentalism (11).

To illustrate: Barton intends for her experiences visiting the Creation Museum to signal the persistence of conservative Christian irrationality in the face of scientific evidence: “cracking open their [conservative Christian] belief system a tiny bit to accommodate gay people means the dissolution of their religious structure” (226). Such a statement does not reflect current trends in American evangelical thought — most especially current research that shows younger American evangelicals are increasingly disinterested in regulating Americans’ sexual morality, specifically with regard to abortion and same-sex marriage.

Barton’s “Bible Belt Christianity” is at once singular and elusive. Barton signals the multiplicity of queer contact with southern Christianities in her final two chapters. But the author makes no mention of the role Southern religious leaders and organizations have

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.splcenter.org/get-informed/intelligence-report/browse-all-issues/2010/winter/anti-gay-hate-crimes-doing-the-math>

played in efforts toward full inclusion of LGBTQ persons in communities of faith or queer equality before the law. Neither am I persuaded that “the Bible Belt” is a meaningful or useful category of analysis. The evangelical Christians of central North Carolina might be unrecognizable as such to evangelical Christians of rural Alabama. More to the point, the closet of a poor black lesbian member of Mississippi’s Southern Baptist Convention might well be far more “toxic” than that of an affluent white gay man attending progressive United Church of Christ services in Durham, NC. Audre Lorde, whose words serve as an epigraph to Barton’s introduction, might remind us that there is no hierarchy of oppressions — but neither is there a blanket equivalency among the experiences of “Bible Belt Gays.” To reduce the varied and polysemic category of Southern Christianities to “Bible Belt Christians” is to obscure the geographic, political, sexual, and religious complexity of the American South.

*Elon University, USA*

MEGAN GOODWIN

**Catholic Teaching on Homosexuality: New Paths to Understanding.** By LOUIS J. CAMELI. Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press. 2012. Pp. 192. \$16.95/£11.99 (pbk). ISBN: 978-1-59471-293-7.

Louis Cameli boldly steps into a daunting landscape of the seeming contradiction of magisterial teaching on sexuality for homosexual persons and the Church’s pastoral invitations of deep and loving care expressing the welcome of Christ. I applaud Cameli’s presentation in how it holds together both aspects of Church teaching: its instruction on matters of morals and faith, and its pastoral insistence on genuine and holistic response to those who are homosexual. Clearly he is offering a route to explore what he calls “confusions and volatility” often associated with faithfulness in these matters. He is not content to provide a reductionist focus on only the prohibitive elements of magisterial teaching. It represents a humane way to move through a teaching that has been painful for many. However, his arguments and some of his underlying assumptions display a lack of understanding of current scholarship on sexual orientation and gender identity, as well as ignoring the possibility of God’s design as larger and more complex than the Church’s heteronormative teaching would suggest.

The intention and direction of his argument is laudable; all are called to holiness in and through our sexuality. Cameli reiterates that those who are homosexual do not fall under a unique kind of condemnation. He eschews the typical debate around issues connected to homosexuality; he states it is misinformed, adversarial politics and confuses what church teaching holds for those who are homosexual persons. Instead, he returns the reader to a philosophical assumption embedded within Catholic tradition of objective criteria revealed to us in the very structures of human nature and creation. Thus the truth of our sexuality comes to us as gift, as an a priori reality of the created order.

While Cameli’s effort is clearly to bring a unified voice of church teaching on human sexuality as it applies to all persons, he does so by using a longstanding apologetic view of human sexuality within the tradition. He suggests that magisterial teaching on human sexuality is binding in its two primary insights: the absolute procreative mandate and its view of sexual complementarity. But this is not particularly compelling as these assumptions can no longer be sustained within the current scientific understanding of sex and gender. If one is truly attempting to provide a profound theological anthropology that responds to objective criteria about human sexuality, scientific contributions cannot be ignored. At the very least we should be very cautious in our declarative statements about sex difference, gender identity and the full spectrum of sexuality as it is still being discovered through the varied applications of human reasoning in the social and biological sciences.

Despite this oversight, Cameli affirms sexuality is a gift, clarifies its positivity, and expands upon the teaching by Pope John Paul II in his theology of the body, by suggesting a blending of insights that arise from both our spirituality and sexuality. Our embodied existence is a